

# Covering violence against women and girls on the border: Comparing news from Texas and Mexico

## Cubriendo la violencia contra mujeres y niñas en la frontera: Comparación de noticias de Texas y México

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Submitted: 30-08-2024 – Approved: 10-02-2025

<https://doi.org/10.26441/RC24.1-2025-3649>

**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates violence against women and girls (VAWG) along the Texas-Mexico border through the lens of the news published in newspapers: *MyRGV* in McAllen (Texas), the *El Paso Times* in El Paso (Texas), *El Mañana de Reynosa* in Tamaulipas (Mexico), and *El Heraldo de Juárez* in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). It employs a mixed-method approach, conducting quantitative content analysis and qualitative framing analysis. The findings reveal that Mexican newspapers primarily chose to publish stories about murder as the main crime against women and girls, while Texas newspapers focused on sexual violence. Mexican newspapers also covered immigration-related VAWG. Female journalists in Mexico often connected crimes with psychological trauma. Texas newspapers employed episodic framing and victim-blaming, whereas Mexican newspapers framed stories in a victim-supporting manner. Texas newspapers did not distinguish crimes against women from other crimes, whereas Mexican newspapers used the term 'femicide' and treated crimes against women and children as gender- and age-specific.

**Keywords:** Border; violence; women; framing; mixed methods.

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio investiga la violencia contra mujeres y niñas (VAWG) a lo largo de la frontera entre Texas y México a través de la cobertura de noticias en cuatro periódicos: *MyRGV* en McAllen (Texas), *El Paso Times* en El Paso (Texas), *El Mañana de Reynosa* en Tamaulipas (México), y *El Heraldo de Juárez* en Ciudad Juárez (México). Se emplea un enfoque de métodos mixtos, realizando análisis cuantitativo de contenido y análisis cualitativo de encuadres. Los hallazgos revelan que los periódicos

mexicanos eligieron principalmente publicar historias sobre asesinatos como el principal delito contra mujeres y niñas, mientras que los periódicos de Texas se enfocaron en la violencia sexual. Los periódicos mexicanos cubrieron la VCMN relacionándola con la inmigración, y los periódicos de Texas no. Los periodistas en México a menudo conectaron los crímenes con los traumas psicológicos y esto es ausente en los periódicos de Texas. Los periódicos de Texas emplearon un encuadre episódico y culpabilización de la víctima, mientras que los periódicos mexicanos enmarcaron las historias en apoyo a la víctima. Los periódicos de Texas no distinguieron los crímenes contra mujeres de otros crímenes, mientras que los periódicos mexicanos utilizaron el término 'feminicidio' y trataron los crímenes contra mujeres y niños como específicos de género y edad.

**Palabras clave:** frontera; violencia; mujeres; encuadre; métodos mixtos.

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) acknowledged women's inherent human right to exist without being subjected to violence in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence in 1993 (Mensa & Grow, 2023). According to the UN, violence against women encompasses "any form of gender-based violence causing or likely to cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women. This includes threats of such acts, coercion, or unjust deprivation of liberty, whether experienced in public or private spheres" (UN Women, 2013).

The borders between countries are frequently sites of escalated violence (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona, 2010; Rigo & De Masi, 2019). They serve as breeding grounds for illicit networks, including drugs, human trafficking, and prostitution, due to their status as politically and militarily controlled areas (Brown, 2010; Pinelli, 2017). These illicit networks must become increasingly sophisticated to evade military control (Rigo, 2019). For instance, according to the U.S Sentencing Commission (2023), in federal judicial districts along the U.S. southern border, drug trafficking is one of the most prosecuted crimes. In 2022, the Southern District of California had 1,827 drug trafficking charges, while the Southern District of Texas was the second with 981 charges. Plus, the border between Mexico and the United States often sees undocumented immigration (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona, 2010; Slack et al., 2016; Soria-Escalante et al., 2022). From May 2023 to December 2023, U.S. Customs and Border Protection returned 472,000 immigrants. Of course, some borders are more peaceful than others. However, the Mexico-Texas border, with its illicit networks and undocumented immigration, has become an unsafe place for women and girls. According to Morgan (2023), one of the most dangerous border cities for immigrant women in Mexico is Ciudad Juárez, near El Paso, Texas. Morgan calls for research on violence against women in border cities.

This study sought to compare news coverage of violence against women and girls (VAWG) along the border between the U.S. and Mexico, specifically in the U.S. state of Texas and the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Tamaulipas. Reporting on border cities requires understanding two countries and two cultures (Carter & Kodrich, 2013; Malvaso et al., 2018). The border of Texas comprises approximately half of the United States-Mexico border from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso (Texas Health and Human Services, 2024). For this research, the authors gathered news stories from newspapers in cities across the border from each other for three months in 2023 to discover the ways in which the U.S. and Mexican news media covered gender-based VAWG. The stories were collected from the Texas Rio Grande Valley news organization *MyRGV*, based in McAllen (Texas), and the Reynosa (Tamaulipas – Mexico) newspaper *El Mañana de Reynosa*, which are within 16 miles from each other across the Rio Grande (Rio Bravo in Mexico). Additionally, stories were collected from the *El Paso Times* newspaper in El Paso (Texas) and from *El Heraldo de Juárez*, a newspaper in Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua -Mexico), which are geographically aligned on either side of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo from each other.

The aim of this study was to explore how Mexican and U.S. news organizations covered gender-based violence, examining both the similarities and differences in their approaches. It also sought to identify the types of VAWG highlighted by these news organizations and analyze how

women and girls were framed in stories about gender-based violence. Given the broad and complex spectrum of violence portrayed in newspapers, this was a challenging and demanding endeavor. To address this, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods for a comprehensive analysis.

## 2. Literature Review

The Texas-Mexico border is a vibrant and complex region shaped by notable differences in culture, economy, infrastructure, governance, and social dynamics on each side (Davis, 2020; Gonzalez Hernandez, 2018; Heyman, 2017). Regarding VAWG and newspaper coverage, research on the Texas-Mexico border predominantly addresses crime, drug trafficking, and immigration, with limited attention to VAWG through a gendered lens (Carter & Kodrich, 2013; Mercado, 2015; Richards et al., 2011, 2014; Ross et al., 2009). Studies reveal that media coverage often lacks systemic analysis, with Mexican newspapers emphasizing femicide, while U.S. newspapers individualize cases and frequently diminish victims' humanity (Aldrete, 2024; Branch, 2019; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona, 2010; Gonzalez, 2021). However, comparative analyses of how U.S. and Mexican newspapers represent VAWG across the border remain scarce, highlighting a critical gap in the literature.

### 2.1. Texas-Mexico Border Covered by the News

Borders are ripe for news coverage because they are spaces where two or more cultures meet (Carter & Kodrich, 2013; Mercado, 2015; Ross et al., 2009; Morgan, 2023). Most news on the Texas-Mexican border focuses on crime and immigration. For instance, Martínez, Lozano and Rodríguez (2012) analyzed the content of news about drug trafficking in eight newspapers from the Mexico-Texas border region for two weeks. They found that neither Mexican newspapers nor Texan ones provided useful information regarding the need to protect the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. Also, Correa-Cabrera (2012) examined drug violence news on the Texas-Tamaulipas border; the author identified that mass media were alarmist when reporting on this topic. About immigration, Muñiz (2011) examined the content of three Mexican newspapers. He identified four news frames that concentrated on political debate, delinquency and expulsion, regularization processes, and the migratory experience. The literature on migratory experiences and VAWG at the border is extensive but has primarily been studied through personal experiences rather than through the lens of newspaper analysis. Ramage et al. (2023)'s study focuses on understanding the experiences of violence faced by women and girls during the immigration process through in-depth interviews. They interviewed Central American women along the Mexico-U.S. border about physical, emotional, and sexual violence. They found that repeated exposure to violence contributed to poor mental health among women. Similar research from Cook Heffron (2019) explored various types of violence experienced by Central American women during the pre-migration, in-transit, and post-migration phases. The author found that these women endured violence before, during, and after crossing the border. Also, Soria-Escalante et al., (2022) found that immigrant women suffered sexual violence during migratory transit through Mexico. Morgan (2023) identified connections between the state portrayal of immigrant women and violence in U.S.-Mexico border cities. She highlighted the dangers faced by women in these areas and emphasized the general lack of research on violence against women in these cities.

Research on media coverage of the Texas-Mexico border predominantly focuses on broad themes such as crime, drug trafficking, and immigration. However, most studies lack a gender perspective and do not compare U.S. and Mexican newspapers. This omission highlights a gap in academic research on media coverage in this region. Without a gender lens, studies fail to capture the full complexity of border-related issues, particularly as they pertain to women and girls.

## 2.2. Violence Against Women and Girls in Texas-Mexico Border in News

Studies on how Mexican newspapers have covered news related to VAWG have been conducted, but they did not approach violence as a holistic topic. Instead, they focused exclusively on specific types of violence, such as femicide or intimate partner violence (Aldrete, 2024; Branch, 2019; Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona, 2010; Gonzalez, 2021). Aldrete (2024) examined how Mexican news media portray femicide, focusing on the social representations of both victims and perpetrators. Similarly, Gonzalez (2021) investigated the dynamics of gender-based violence (GBV) in Ciudad Juárez during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing official police reports and victim testimonies. The results reveal that pandemic restrictions significantly influenced the prevalence of gender-based violence. Branch (2019)'s thesis compares how newspapers portray femicide in two cities: Detroit, Michigan, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Buenrostro (2022) expanded the analysis beyond Mexico to other Spanish-speaking countries using qualitative content analysis of newspapers reporting on femicides. The findings show that media narratives frequently present femicides as isolated incidents or personal conflicts, failing to address broader structural issues.

Research specifically focusing on how Texas newspapers report on VAWG is limited, despite Texas being one of the states with the highest rates of domestic violence. In 2024, 40.1% of women in Texas experienced this crime (World Population Review, 2024). However, several studies have examined U.S. newspaper coverage, focusing on femicide and domestic violence in the USA but not specifically in Texas (Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2011). Gillespie et al. (2013) investigated how U.S. newspapers report on femicide, focusing on the framing of incidents of deadly domestic VAW. They found that victims are often portrayed in ways that diminish their humanity or suggest complicity in their victimization. Similarly, Richards et al. (2011) examined how U.S. newspapers report on femicide. They found that coverage frequently includes information about the victim's behavior, lifestyle, or choices, implying responsibility for the violence they experienced. Finally, Richards et al. (2014) investigated how femicide-suicides are represented in U.S. newspapers, finding that coverage often shifts the narrative focus from the femicide to the perpetrator's suicide, minimizing the harm caused to the victim.

There is a significant gap in academic research on VAWG along the Texas-Mexico border through the lens of newspaper coverage. Although existing studies often focus on specific topics such as femicide, they predominantly limit their scope to this issue. Comprehensive research that examines VAWG in its entirety, while offering a comparative analysis of media coverage between Mexico and the United States, is notably absent. This lack of holistic and contextualized studies highlights the need for further exploration and research into how media representations influence VAWG in these regions.

## 2.3. Framing Theory

Framing theory was developed by Erving Goffman (1974) to interpret how people analyze, organize, and make sense of information and meaning in society. Robert Entman (1993) and other scholars developed the theory to apply to mass communication, and particularly, news media, to understand how mass media organizations present information to the public. News media framing analysis may be employed to uncover bias through conducting content analysis (Entman, 2010). With an inductive, qualitative approach, framing analysis may be used to uncover patterns and themes in news media coverage by identifying language used in headlines and stories, sources quoted and attributed by journalists, visual images, placement on pages, and other factors in the news gathering and gatekeeping processes. For example, Reese (2010) analyzed media coverage of the U.S. "The War on Terror" in the early 2000s to determine what kinds of frames journalists used to convey meaning to the public about the war in Iraq and possibly shape U.S. foreign policy. Journalists learn how to cover issues through

their education and training and biases they learn may be incorporated into their publications and broadcasts (Entman, 2010). Some of that bias includes reflections of constructed gender roles and extends the ways exclusion and trivialization of women are framed in the media (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010). In this study, we also employ a qualitative, inductive approach to framing to determine the patterns used by journalists along the Texas-Mexico border in covering VAWG. Lee & Wong (2020) also conducted a qualitative content analysis of VAWG coverage in a Canadian newspaper and found that the crimes were portrayed as a series of isolated incidents. They also noted that the newspaper stories blamed women and girls for their own victimization rather than identifying violence against them as a societal problem that needs addressing. The authors concluded, “In a male-dominated society, these ideas and beliefs have been ingrained in the public’s mind through the manner in which gender roles and rights are discussed and presented. When the media continue to present and frame current issues in a way that perpetuates these beliefs, it hinders the process of change from occurring” (p. 227).

Of particular relevance is the concept of episodic versus thematic framing. While thematic framing provides greater context for a story, episodic framing focuses on singular events detached from the greater context (Boukes, 2022). In research on episodic framing and VAW, Meltzer (2023) found that media coverage of VAW was underreported in news and almost never placed within a societal context of crimes against women and women’s rights. Aldrete (2024), in an analysis of episodic versus thematic framing in Mexican newspaper coverage of VAW, found that episodic framing was often focused on what the women did wrong instead of placing greater emphasis on the greater social issues concerning VAW.

## 2.4. Research Questions

The overarching research goal is to explore the differences and/or similarities that exist in the treatment of news about VAWG on the border between Texas and Mexico (Chihuahua and Tamaulipas). The following research questions were asked:

- RQ1A: What acts of VAWG are most frequently reported on the Texas-Mexico border through the lens of newspapers? RQ1B: What are the correlations between different types of violence and their victims (women, girls, or both) as reported in newspapers on the Texas-Mexico border? RQ1C: Which type of violence—physical, emotional, or sexual—is most commonly mentioned in the news?
- RQ2: What are the sources of news concerning VAWG on the Texas-Mexico border?
- RQ3: What types of images related to the topic of VAWG are portrayed by newspapers on the Texas-Mexico border?
- RQ4: How are stories about VAWG framed in newspapers on the Texas-Mexican border?

## 3. Methods

We conducted a mixed-method to observe and analyze news content in Spanish and English. The first study utilized a quantitative approach, employing a content analysis method. Through a codebook, we identified and examined instances of VAWG, sources, and visual representations focusing on the Texas-Mexico border. The second part of the study identified qualitative frames for a more in-depth examination of how VAWG was presented and how these portrayals might influence audiences who consume the news.

### 3.1. Data Collection and Sampling Procedure

Both a quantitative and qualitative content analysis were performed on the news of the *El Mañana de Reynosa* (Mexico), *El Heraldo de Juárez* (Mexico), *El Paso Times* (Texas) and *My RGV*

(Texas) news organizations on the border of the United States and Mexico. The Reynosa newspaper, in Tamaulipas state of northeast Mexico, was founded in 1947 and is across the border from Texas' Rio Grande Valley, where *My RGV*, the largest news organization in the area, is located. *My RGV* is a collective of three newspapers: *The Valley Morning Star* (founded 1909 in Harlingen, Texas), *The Monitor* (founded 1909 in McAllen, Texas), and *The Brownsville Herald* (founded 1892). The Juárez newspaper is located in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state, which is across the Rio Grande (a.k.a. Rio Bravo) from El Paso in southwest Texas. *El Heraldo* is a national Mexican newspaper founded in 1965 and the edition we analyzed focuses on Juárez. The *El Paso Times* (founded in 1881) is the largest news organization in the El Paso area. During a three-month period (October, November, and December 2023), the authors, fluent in English and Spanish, collected news stories in English from the two Texas newspapers: 35 from the *El Paso Times* and 29 from *My RGV*. Stories were collected in Spanish from two Mexican newspapers: 128 from *el Heraldo de Juárez* and 39 from *El Mañana de Reynosa*.

The selection criteria was: 1. News with at least one woman/girl who suffered violence during these three months; 2. This/These women/girls had to be mentioned in the news with her/their name or with the words “woman,” “women” or “girl/s,” “mujer/es”, “niña/as”, “hija/s”, “una/la menor/es”, “una/la ex pareja”, “fémimas” or “madre/hija”. 3. All the news has to be local; 4. Intentional acts of VAWG are the focus, excluding instances of harm resulting from accidents or natural disasters, which may lead to fatalities. We studied this issue through a gender focus and note that we did not find any stories about violence against transgender or nonbinary people.

Initially, the samples revealed 231 news stories. Following these four criteria, we revisited the sample and refined it. Some stories did not meet the criteria—for instance, news reports that mentioned “a group of immigrants” or “people” without specifying whether women or girls were involved. These stories were eliminated from the sample. Additionally, we identified duplicate news articles that had been saved twice, and these were also removed. The final sample contained 210 news stories: 120 from *El Heraldo de Juárez* and 34 from *El Mañana de Reynosa* in Spanish; 30 news stories from the *El Paso Times* and 26 from *My RGV* in English.

### 3.1.1. Codebook and Intercoder Reliability (ICR)

A specific codebook was developed to analyze each of the units of analysis: the news stories. This code was based on previous research (Cook Heffron, 2019; Ramage et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2021). Before the coding process began, from January 31 to February 13, 2024, four coders underwent training on the use of the codebook to ensure intercoder reliability. The coders were students from a research course and were fluent in both Spanish and English. Following the recommendation of Wimmer and Dominick (2013), a total of 31 news articles in Spanish and 12 in English, representing 20% of the Spanish and English overall samples, were randomly selected for coding by all four coders. To assess consistency across coders, intercoder reliability tests using Fleiss' kappa (as suggested by Siegel & Castellan, 1988) were conducted for each variable. The results of these tests were satisfactory, with kappa values ranging from .90 to 1.00, indicating substantial agreement among the coders. According to Krippendorff (2018), any variable scoring less than 80% would indicate insufficient reliability; however, the results demonstrated good reliability, allowing the research to proceed. The same coders then coded the entire sample using the SPSS statistical program (version 29) (see Table 1). After a debriefing session to address any coding discrepancies, the four coders independently completed coding the remaining articles. The entire coding process was finalized during March and April 2024.

**Table 1.** Codebook and ICR

Variable	Description	Code	Spanish ICR	English ICR
Byline	Identify the authorship of the news articles.	1= Woman 2=Men 3=Multiple people 4=Edition/Unknown	100%	100%
Newspaper	Identify the specific newspaper publication.	1=El mañana de Reynosa 2=El Heraldo de Juárez 3=El Paso Times 4= My RGV (Texas)	100%	100%
Border	Identify the specific border region.	1=Mexico 2=Texas	100%	100%
Month	Specify the exact month.	1=October 2=November 3=December	100%	100%
Violence Type	Identify whether the violence experienced by women or girls is linked to <b>physical</b> (Slaps, shoves, hits, punches, pushes, being thrown down stairs or across the room, kicking, twisting of arms, choking, and being burnt or stabbed), <b>sexual</b> (Rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, enforced prostitution, and being made to have sex with friends of the perpetrator), or/and <b>psychological</b> abuse (Causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner or children; destruction of pets and property; "mind games"; or forcing isolation from friends, family, school and/or work.)	Physical (1=yes; 0=no); Sexual (1=yes; 0=no); Psychological (1=yes; 0=no).	100%	99%
Associated Subject	Identify the subject matter to which VAWG in the news is connected.	1= Immigration 2= Domestic Violence 3= Femicide 4= Gang Violence 5= Sexual Violence (Rape and Pedophile) 6= Human Trafficking 7= Detention/Police Brutality 8= Theft violence 9= Kidnapping 10=Drugs 11=Murder (no Femicide) 12= Disappearance 13=Other	90%	91%
Women or Girl Name	Identify whether the name(s) of the woman/women/girl(s) appear in the news article.	1=yes 0=no	100%	100%
Experienced By	Identify whether any instances of violence have been encountered by either a woman, girl, or both.	1=Woma(e)n 2=Girl(s) 3=Woman/en and Girl(s)	100%	100%
Sources	Identify the types of sources utilized in the news coverage.	Police (1=yes; 0=no) Witnesses (1=yes; 0=no) Authorities (1=yes; 0=no) Victim (1=yes; 0=no) Others (1=yes; 0=no)	91%	92%
Association	Determine whether the news article has any association, affiliation, or connection with non-governmental organizations, public associations, or similar entities that offer assistance or support services to victims or survivors of the VAWG.	1=yes 0=no	100%	95%
Image	Identify the type of imagery accompanying the news.	1=Arrested/ Suspect and/or prisoner 2=Crime Scene; 3=Victim(s) 4=Police 5= Protest 6= Others 0=No image	95%	98%

Source: Own elaboration.

### 3.2. Qualitative Method: Thematic Framing Analysis

Two trained researchers examined three month's worth of stories (October 1-December 31, 2023) gathered from the Texas and Mexican newspapers to identify frames, taking into account a coding frame presented by Lee and Wong (2020). The current researchers read 56 stories collected from the Texas newspapers, taking individual notes. We then met to discuss the categories and themes we identified and narrowed the themes further to identify common patterns in the coverage. We moved from descriptive codes to categorical codes, and finally to analytical codes that identified collective meaning, following Hesse-Biber's (2017) qualitative coding outline. To analyze the Mexican newspapers, we repeated the process after incorporating translation software that allowed the researchers to read the stories in English. We randomly chose a sample of 50 stories from the Mexican newspapers to have a roughly equal amount to compare with the U.S. newspapers.

## 4. Results

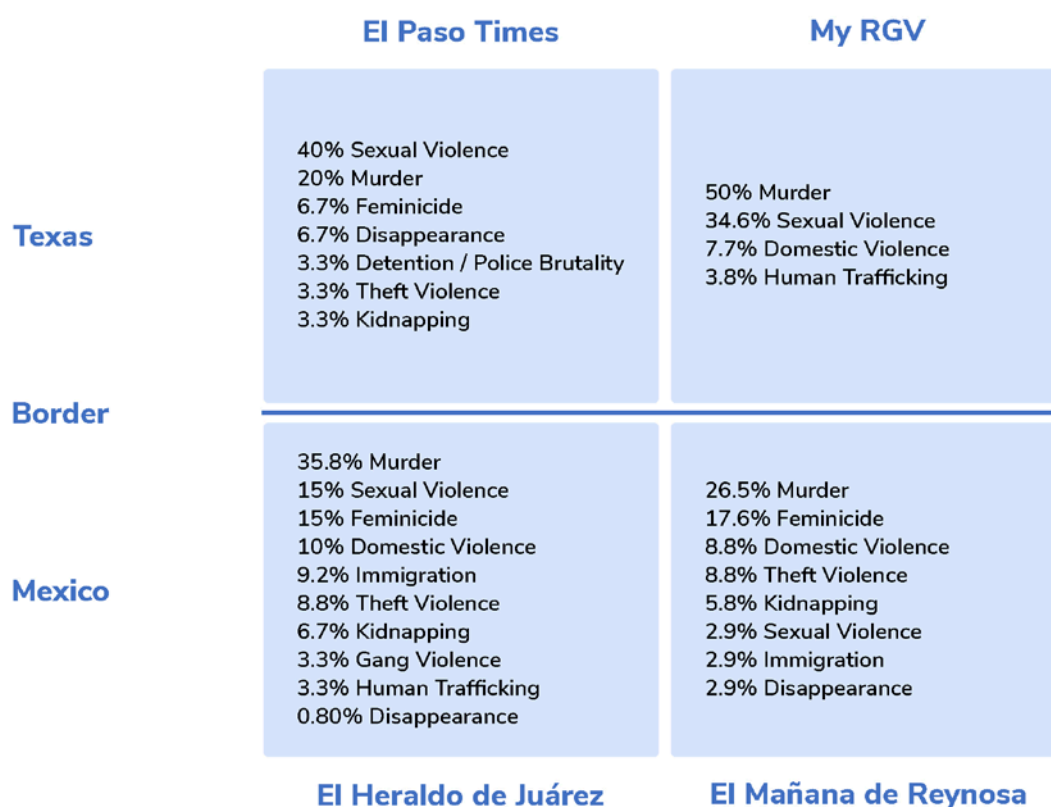
The content analysis quantitative results address the first three research questions followed by a qualitative analysis of RQ4.

### 4.1. Quantitative Content Analysis

RQ1A aimed to identify the most frequent acts of VAWG reported on the Texas-Mexico border through the lens of newspapers. The findings indicate that in Mexico, murder (non-femicide) was the most frequently reported type of VAWG, with 35.8% of news in *El Heraldo de Juárez* and 26.5% news in *El Mañana de Reynosa*. In Texas, sexual violence was the most commonly reported form of VAWG in the *El Paso Times* (40%), while murder was the most frequently reported in *My RGV* (50%). It is noteworthy that violence associated with women and girls in the context of immigration was addressed exclusively in Mexican newspapers and was absent from Texas newspapers (see Figure 1). Regarding the correlation between acts of VAWG and victims, the RQ1B, the results showed that women (without girls) were primarily victims of murder (84.5%), femicide (15.9%), and domestic violence (10.9%). In contrast, girls (without women) were predominantly victims of sexual violence, particularly rape and pedophilia (57.1%). Furthermore, instances of double victimization—where both women and girls were affected—were immigration (30.4%) and human trafficking (13%). RQ1C explored which type of violence—physical, emotional, or sexual—was most frequently mentioned in the news. Results indicate that physical violence was the most commonly reported (81.4%), followed by sexual violence (21%), and psychological violence (1.6%). An interesting finding is that when a Mexican female journalist authored the news stories, psychological trauma was mentioned more frequently (30.8%) compared to stories written by men (3.8%). This contrasts with the situation in Texas, where there is a notable lack of female journalists covering VAWG. For example, in *My RGV*, none of the analyzed news stories were written by women, while in the *El Paso Times*, 8 stories were authored by women compared to 21 by men.

RQ2 examined the sources of news regarding VAWG on the Texas-Mexico border. Authorities (e.g., lawyers, ministers, politicians, representatives of the judiciary, or federal government) and police were the most common sources utilized by newspapers in this region to report VAWG incidents. Mexican newspapers relied more heavily on authoritative sources, with *El Mañana de Reynosa* (64.7%) and *El Heraldo de Juárez* (60.8%) demonstrating significant usage. In Texas, the *El Paso Times* predominantly relied on authorities (83.36%), while police emerged as the primary source for *My RGV* (57.7%) (see Table 2). Relatives were the third most frequently cited source in news stories, particularly in *My RGV* (Texas).

**Figure 1.** VAWG acts and newspaper in the border



Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 2.** Newspaper Cross Tabulation

Source	Mexico				Texas			
	El Mañana de Reynosa	%	El Heraldo de Juárez	%	El Paso Times	%	My RGV	%
Police	18	52.9	48	40.00	6	20.00	15	57.70
Witness	3	8.80	32	26.70	1	3.30	4	15.40
Authorities	22	64.70	73	60.80	25	83.36	14	53.80
Victim	0	0.00	12	10.00	4	13.30	5	19.20
Relatives	5	14.70	8	6.70	3	10	10	38.50
Others	9	26.50	3	2.50	3	10	0	0.00

Source: Own elaboration.

RQ3 explored the types of images related to the topic of VAWG portrayed in newspapers along the Texas-Mexico border. In both Mexico and Texas, images often depicted arrests, suspects, or prisoners (41.9%) and crime scenes (29.5%). Images of arrests, suspects, or prisoners were most frequently associated with sexual violence crimes, such as rape and pedophilia (67.50%). In contrast, crime scene images were more commonly linked to murder cases (54.90%). Notably, in contexts involving VAWG, victims' faces were more frequently displayed in cases of kidnapping (36.40%) and immigration (33.3%).

## 4.2. Qualitative Framing Analysis

Journalists employ frames to make sense of stories. They also follow production routines learned through education and professional training (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2010). The three researchers for the qualitative section of this study have conducted numerous framing analyses and one is a former professional journalist who brought that experience to the analysis. We used a qualitative content analysis approach suggested by Hesse-Biber (2017) to code from a grounded theory perspective the articles from the news organizations. We first examined descriptive codes from the words used in the news stories, then advanced to more focused coding with analytical codes. We discussed the coding among the researchers throughout the process to confirm validity and reliability for our analysis of themes. In previous research, Lee and Wong (2020) used critical discourse analysis to identify the ways journalists framed stories in a Canadian newspaper and found the following themes: “Just Another Homicide” (failure to cover the story as violence aimed toward women), “It’s Only a Problem When Newsworthy” (failure to identify the violence as a societal problem), and “99 Reasons and He Ain’t One” (victim blaming). In the U.S. newspapers we examined, *The El Paso Times* and the website *MyRGV* (Rio Grande Valley), we found similar frames as those Lee and Wong identified. We uncovered the following from the Texas and Mexico news coverage.

### 4.2.1. Texas Newspaper Frames

**Homicide, not femicide:** In this category, Texas news stories identified crimes as everyday occurrences, not specifically aimed toward women or girls. Stories in the Texas newspapers did not label the killing of women as a particular type of gender-based crime that differed from the killing of men. One *El Paso Times* story did mention femicide, but in relation to the murder of an activist in Juárez, not in El Paso. A November 30, 2023 *Times* story employed the term in the death of Karina Domínguez Rubio, 38, of Juárez, who had been found buried in a junkyard, “reigniting outrage over the continuous murder of women in the city.” This was framed as a Juárez problem not an El Paso problem, despite the fact that in October 2023, the newspaper was reporting on the trial of a man who had killed El Paso lawyer Georgette Kaufmann in 2020. Also in October, the newspaper reported on the shooting death of a 21-year-old woman outside an El Paso bar and on the knife slashing of a 19-year-old woman who almost died. Her male 27-year-old neighbor was charged in that assault. None of the El Paso crimes against women were identified as gender-based violence.

**Episodic framing:** Rather than framing stories contextually, these stories reported one-off acts of violence instead of concern for society. Of all 56 stories in the Texas newspapers, not one addressed the problem of VAWG as a systemic, societal problem. Each story was framed as a separate crime that happened to occur because of specific conditions rather than identifying widespread abuse against women because of their sex. For instance, an October 7 *MyRGV* story about a 37-year-old divorced woman killed in 2020 by her ex-husband provided some depth by tracking and quoting from court and police records. But the story never placed the issue of VAWG into context by providing statistics of these crimes, resources to help those who are facing violence, advice about how and where to get assistance, or any other information that would humanize the victim, such as interviews with relatives. An October 9 *MyRGV* story about a man who shot and killed his 19-year-old stepdaughter after harassing her and threatening to kill her was presented as a court news story about the man’s 30-year prison sentence. The story did not discuss how often these types of crimes occur, where the teenager may have found help, or details about motives for this kind of crime. A November 17 story about a man sentenced to 20 years in prison for sexually abusing a young girl from age 6 to 8 did not discuss the overall problem of child sexual abuse or any type of resources to combat it, or even where to report it to authorities. The story was only five paragraphs long, with two of them consisting of quotes from a pre-written news release.

Moreover, related issues like child trafficking and child exploitation were not set in greater context. For instance, a December 1 article in *MyRGV* detailed the behavior of a male substitute teacher who exploited children for sexually-explicit photos and videos, then threatened to expose them if they did not send more. The article did not place the story into a societal context about how social media and digital content can make child exploitation easier to perpetrate and how children are more at risk because of social media.

Evidence for episodic framing was also apparent in several stories about domestic violence that did not link this violence to larger issues in the community or in society. One story happily reported on purse donations for victims, but did not place these donations into a wider context about the prevalence of and the fallout from domestic violence.

Victim-blaming: These stories either insinuated the victims' actions or behavior somehow contributed to the crimes against them or perpetuated rape culture/myths. A December 7 story in the *El Paso Times* about a 16-year-old girl who was sex trafficked by a 37-year-old man referred to the minor "having sex" several times with the adult man, using terms that promoted rape culture because under the law, a minor cannot consent to sex with an adult. The same story quoted court records that described the man asking the girl if she wanted to be a prostitute and the girl saying she wanted to make money, as if the minor desired the exploitation. Despite a quote from a federal prosecutor saying, "we all can play a role in prevention" of sexual exploitation, the story provided no information on how to prevent such crimes, no resources on information or assistance, and no suggestions on how to protect children who might be trafficked in this way.

Another *El Paso Times* story from October 12 reported that a 27-year-old male teacher was criminally charged for "having sexual relations with a 14-year-old eighth grader," when the girl was a minor. The story goes on to say the girl sent him nude photos and "had sex with him" without pointing out that by Texas law, a 14-year-old cannot consent legally to sex with an adult. A *MyRGV* story on November 16 also perpetuated rape myths. A man who was both a pastor and medical doctor was convicted of sexually assaulting two women. The reporter quoted prosecutors as saying the accused was motivated by "greed" and "lust," rather than noting he committed violent crimes involving power and control. The newspaper also ran a story the previous day about character witnesses who said this man was "honest" and "a visionary," despite the fact he had pleaded guilty to the sexual assaults. A December 27 story from *MyRGV* reported that a 45-year-old woman's common-law-husband had killed her in rural Donna, Texas, and that he had taken her car and fled to Mexico. In the lead of the story (first paragraph), the newspaper reported that the couple had been involved in a "domestic dispute," rather than framing it as violence committed by a man that ended in a woman's death.

#### 4.2.2. Mexico Newspaper Frames

Femicide as a crime: Unlike the U.S. newspapers, the Mexican newspapers tended to specifically point out crimes that targeted girls and women based on their sex. One reason the Mexican newspapers may have singled out femicide is because, unlike the U.S. government, the Mexican government has institutionalized crimes against women, children, and adolescents as particular categories and has set up separate government offices to investigate and prosecute these cases. For instance, *El Heraldo de Juárez* reported on the sentencing of a man and woman in the femicide of a 3-year-old girl. The case was investigated by an office that translates into English as the Special Prosecutor's Office for Attention to Women Victims of Crime for Gender Reasons and the Family (FEM acronym in Spanish). In another story, *El Heraldo de Juárez* reported that four men were arrested on charges including rape, sexual abuse, and family VAWG, assigned to the same office. An article in *El Heraldo de Juárez* about Karina Domínguez Rubio, the activist killed in Juárez (whose death also was reported by the *El Paso Times*), provided more context about the victim's work than the *Times* did and mentioned the problem of human trafficking

in the border region. This article also went into more detail than the *El Paso Times* paper by providing details on the cause of death and state of the body's decomposition. The newspaper also reported Rubio Dominguez's murder was being investigated by the FEM.

**Episodic framing:** Like the U.S. newspapers, both newspapers in Mexico employed episodic framing. Many of the stories originated from police or court reports and used official sources, including authorities from government offices, to report the information. Most of the stories failed to report in depth about the crimes or to humanize the victims, with some exceptions. One article from *El Heraldo de Juárez* nonchalantly noted that a murder was the second of the day in Juárez, but did not place either killing in a wider context about violence in the community. On the other hand, another *El Heraldo de Juárez* article made note of how many women had been killed in Juárez and the surrounding region during 2023. An *El Heraldo de Juárez* article that was reported from Tijuana bore the headline “Nacer en el Agua” (or Born in the Water) and profiled the reasons why pregnant women from Latin American countries risked everything for immigration journeys to give their children a better future. *El Mañana de Reynosa* published a story on how many people had been prosecuted in the state for crimes against women; however, this story recounted this information from a political candidate running for re-election, not from original reporting. A majority of stories consisted simply of facts obtained from police, courts, and other government officials and were only a few paragraphs long.

**Victim Blaming or Victim Supporting?:** Overall, *El Heraldo de Juárez* used framing that appeared sympathetic to women victims of violence. An *El Heraldo de Juárez* article focused on how girls and young women are more likely to be human trafficked than others and another revealed the human trafficking of migrants from Latin America. The articles employed empathetic terms like dehumanization and objectification to explain why these issues are important. Still, most of the newspaper articles were very short and did not go into detail about the victims. An *El Mañana de Reynosa* story reported in only two sentences that a 57-year-old missing woman's body was found in Harlingen, Texas. The Mexican newspapers used more direct language than the U.S. newspapers. Rather than reporting that “a sexual assault was committed” against a woman or girl (in passive voice), *El Mañana de Reynosa* identified perpetrators as “rapists,” including a 35-year-old man arrested for raping his 19-year-old niece. Most stories in the Spanish-language newspapers did not victim-blame, unlike some of the U.S. publications.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined news coverage of VAWG on the Texas-Mexico border through the lens of four newspapers—two from Texas and two from Mexico. The quantitative findings revealed that murder (non-femicide) was the most frequently reported crime against women and girls in Mexico, while in Texas, sexual violence received the most coverage. Previous research has documented news coverage of drug trafficking along the Mexico-Texas border (Martínez, Lozano, & Rodríguez, 2012). While some VAWG crimes may be connected to drug-related activities, the analyzed news content did not establish such connections explicitly, identifying the crime as a murder. This omission leaves gaps in understanding the intersecting factors that contribute to VAWG in the region. Additionally, VAWG in the context of immigration was addressed exclusively in Mexican newspapers, with Texas newspapers completely omitting this issue. This lack of reporting in Texas limits public awareness and weakens efforts to address these crimes. In contrast, the focus of Mexican newspapers reflects a broader recognition of the vulnerabilities faced by women and girls as migrants (Cook Heffron, 2019; Fleuriet & Castellano, 2020; Ramage et al., 2023; Slack et al., 2016; Soria-Escalante et al., 2022). Furthermore, immigration-related VAWG often results in double victimization, as women and girls face specific acts of violence simultaneously, further compounding their trauma.

Physical violence was the most frequently reported type of VAWG in both regions, overshadowing other forms of harm such as emotional and psychological violence. This overwhelming focus

suggests that media coverage underrepresents the broader spectrum of violence experienced by women and girls, potentially downplaying the long-term impacts of these crimes. Female journalists in Mexico demonstrated more nuanced reporting by including psychological trauma in their coverage, which is often overlooked. In contrast, the lack of female journalists in Texas raises concerns about the diversity of perspectives in reporting on VAWG, highlighting the need for greater gender representation in media roles.

News coverage of VAWG on the Texas-Mexico border predominantly relied on information provided by authorities and police. These sources tend to present official, procedural perspectives on incidents, which can depersonalize the victims and focus more on the criminal or judicial aspects of the crime rather than the broader social or human impact. Regarding the use of images, the study found that crimes like rape and pedophilia were often accompanied by visuals of arrests, suspects, or prisoners, emphasizing the perpetrators. In contrast, murder cases were more frequently paired with crime scene images, suggesting a focus on the location and severity of the crime. Notably, in cases of kidnapping and immigration-related violence, victims' faces were more frequently shown, raising ethical concerns about privacy and consent in media reporting. These findings expose critical gaps in media coverage, particularly in Texas, where the absence of immigration-related violence and psychological impacts limits the scope of public discourse. By identifying these patterns, the study provides a foundation for improving reporting practices, enhancing public awareness, and informing policies that address the diverse forms of violence experienced by women and girls on the border. The results underscore the urgent need for more comprehensive and ethical reporting to reflect the realities of VAWG and support efforts to combat it.

### 5.1. Framing Violence on the Border

As established by previous research, news professionals incorporate frames or patterns in the ways they present stories. These frames are learned through journalism education and newsroom training and become part of journalism routines (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2010). Framing also is incorporated into the ways women are portrayed in the news media (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010). Framing of women often places them as crime victims, particularly as victims of sex crimes (Everbach, 2013). This type of coverage trivializes the victimization and deaths of women and girls at the hands of others. In addition, reporting this news in a way that blames women and girls for their own victimization only further victimizes them and does nothing to solve the problem of violence. Studying the way VAWG is framed in news media can help contribute to changes in media portrayals of women as victims and work toward giving them agency and gender equity.

We can see from our study that the patterns show U.S. newspapers continue to treat VAWG not as a societal problem that needs institutional change, but as an element of crime reporting. The stories here were framed as everyday crimes rather than contextual examinations of an epidemic affecting girls and women. They also were presented as short, individual stories that only rarely addressed the larger problem of VAW. On the whole, the newspapers in Mexico essentially did the same thing, although they did identify crimes against women and girls as a specific category of malfeasance.

The episodic framing identified here can be attributed to the fact that journalists are taught through production routines that crime news is important and that they should obtain information from official sources (Easteal et al., 2022). Journalists often are under deadline pressure, which prevents them from thoroughly investigating crimes on their own and following up on stories. This can explain the short length of many of the stories, the lack of in-depth reporting, and the reliance on official sources rather than humanizing the story through victims' relatives, friends, or even the victims themselves. Some of the U.S. stories reflected rape culture by insinuating that women were to blame for their own victimization, but that

phenomenon was not present in the Mexican newspaper stories. Perhaps the fact that Mexico has acknowledged VAWG as a societal problem and instituted government offices to investigate and prosecute these crimes has helped Mexican journalists avoid writing rape culture into their stories.

Previous studies have shown that training journalists about the damage that is caused by rape myths, victim-blaming, and the societal context of VAWG can improve news coverage by making it more accurate, fair, and informative (Easteal et al., 2022). If provided with this information, journalists may transform their reporting from upholding rape culture and the status quo to identifying the societal problem of VAWG and possibly bringing about legislative and societal change.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

The current study had certain limitations that may be addressed in future research. First, this study analyzed 12 different types of VAWG as reported in newspapers, with the primary goal of exploring which forms of VAWG were most frequently depicted in Texas-Mexico border publications. While this broad and challenging task provided a more holistic understanding of the types of violence experienced by women and girls near the border, future research could delve deeper into the underlying factors influencing the prevalence and representation of specific types of violence. Additionally, expanding this analysis to include the societal and cultural impacts of such portrayals could further enrich our understanding of how VAWG is framed and addressed in border region media. Second, future research should consider conducting interviews with journalists from the selected media outlets who cover the analyzed topics. Incorporating their perspectives would provide valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and decision-making processes behind the coverage. This approach would enhance the depth and credibility of the analysis and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing media representation of the topics under study. Finally, a potential future line of research could also focus on identifying patterns in the representation of VAWG in newspapers and assessing their coherence in relation to official crime data for the region.

## 7. Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the students who helped with this research: Citlali Gonzalez, Dalilah Juarez and Monica Lopez.

## 8. Contribution

Task	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3
Conceptualization	x	x	x
Formal analysis	x	x	
Project administration	x		
Investigation	x	x	x
Methodology	x	x	x
Data curation	x	x	x
Resources	x		
Software	x		
Supervision	x	x	x
Validation	x	x	x
Visualization	x	x	x
Writing – original draft	x	x	
Writing – review and editing			x

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*Revista de Comunicación*

vol. 24, núm. 1, p. 303 - 320, 2025

Universidad de Piura. Facultad de Comunicación,

**ISSN:** 1684-0933

**ISSN-E:** 2227-1465

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.26441/RC24.1-2025-3649>